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ABSTRACT

The Dynasty Project conducted an empirical analysis of the cross-cultural reception of the program for which it was named. Data were collected via two series of videotaped interviews which were carried out following a viewing of Dynasty episode 105 by a group of subjects together with the researchers. The subjects were 25 American viewers in Los Angeles and 16 Danish Dynasty regulars in the Copenhagen area. Specific findings are described in a qualitative fashion and analyzed from the following perspectives: (1) the interdisciplinary nature of the Dynasty Project; (2) the project's lack of sympathy for and cultural elitist attitudes toward commercial television fiction and toward popular culture in general; (3) television's function as the main forum for collective cultural processes; (4) liminal processes; (5) the "hegemonic effect" of television; (6) the theory of heteroglossia; (7) the reasons for audience addiction to Dynasty; (8) the extent of viewer involvement with the program; (9) the notion of distance; and (10) Dynasty as the interminable hermeneutic puzzle. (12 endnotes and 25 references) (CGD)

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THE PLEASURE OF DYNASTY:
The Weekly Reconstruction of Self-confidence.

Kim Christian Schrøder

April 1986
Paper presented to the International Television Studies Conference 1986

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> Outsiders from the high culture who visit tv melodrama occasionally in order to issue their tedious reports about our cultural malaise are simply not seeing what the tv audience sees.
> (Thorburn, 1976)

"The Boston Tea Party"

In the 105th episode of Dynasty almost all of the Carringtons and the Colbys have gone off to an oil producers' summit in Acapulco, with the exception of Krystle whose meetings in Denver with horse-breeder and tycoon Daniel Reece (Rock Hudson) are being shadowed by a spy photographer. In Acapulco, Alexis challenges Blake's rights to some important Chinese oil leases. One of the skirmishes of their battle is a vicious verbal duel between British-born Alexis (Joan Collins) and a Blake ally, American Ashley Mitchell (Ali McGraw), whose last bullit for Alexis is a subtle warning not to go too far:"Watch out, Alexis, remember the Boston Tea Party!"

I used episode 105 for one of my interviews with Danish viewers of Dynasty. In one of them I talked to JH, a working-class man in his mid-fifties and his somewhat younger wife HH; when we had watched the episode together we continued talking about it and about Dynasty in general. After about twenty minutes I tried to get them to talk about the complicated family relations in Dynasty:

Int. The family relations in Dynasty are quite intricate, aren't they, as you're saying; let's take Reece and Krystle for instance, Reece was in fact married to, no he was going to marry Krystle's sister, wasn't he?

HH Yes... but she died of an illness.

Int. Yes, but before she died she gave birth to Reece's child, who is Sammy Jo, right? |Yeah| - So Reece is the father of Sammy Jo, who is later married to Stephen...

JH It's really a bit far-fetched...

HH But that photographer, I'd be fucking pleased to know who he - or she - is, that's for sure.

JH I believe it's a woman, it was such a slender glove...

HH I can't figure that one out...

(...)

HH I'm not sure, but I think this Dominique may be behind that photographer. I really think she is (...) because I think Dominique and Krystle used to know each other, years back, only we haven't been told about it.

JH And Ashley has something on Alexis, from years back... Something about a tea party...

Int. ...something in the past...

HH Yes, and what the hell's that tea party supposed to mean, we didn't hear anything about that before!

JH No, and she even mentioned where it took place... I forget...

Int. Boston.

JH Yes.

This little piece of dialogue can be used in various ways. Many readers have probably already used it for a hearty laugh (as I did driving home after the interview), indulging in the facile pleasure of the educated when faced with vulgar ignorance.

The dialogue can also be used as a reverse illustration of the reason for the preference among Danish viewers for Danish programs (other things being equal, of course): In national programming they understand allusions to the common cultural heritage, to puns, etc., just as probably no American, however uneducated, misses the point about The Boston Tea Party.

In the context of this paper I shall use the couple's mis-understanding to shed light on normal processes of understanding, just as the psycholinguist uses research into "speech defects" to arrive at conclusions about normal speech production.

How does the couple arrive at <u>their</u> understanding of the sequence of tv discourse? They rely on the individualized socio-

cultural language codes at their disposal in order to fix the propositional meaning of the sequence, adding their reservoir of "background knowledge" and the aesthetic ressources necessary to arrive at the fictional significance.

Clearly, because of insufficient background knowledge they never realize that they have to activate their metaphorical competence in order to generate the rather subtle contemporary significance of the historical reference. Instead they mobilize another aesthetic ressource, which they have built up through nearly a hundred weekly exposures to Dynasty. Because of their addiction they master to perfection the program's generic codes, one of which is the gradual initiation of the audience into contrived "secret" character relations.

As the interview passage shows JH and HH are constantly scouting the fictional terrain for such concealed connections (line 10ff., 15ff., 19ff.) and The Boston Tea Party fits neatly into this generic pattern.

The decoding accomplished by these two people would normally be categorized as "erroneous", but in our context here what matters is that their "error" provides an insight into decoding processes in general. Every viewer of Dynasty (or any other program) actualizes the meaning of the serial in accordance with similar interpretive ressources, some of which are culturally shared while others are idiosyncratic.

Such interplay between text and recipient, this give-and-take of the signification process is what lies behind the familiar expression that viewers "negotiate" the meaning of Dynasty; or, removing the emphasis even further towards the role of the reader, that viewers "<u>make</u> sense of" the tv text.

As a result, the distinction between "erroneous" and "correct" readings becomes rather meaningless; only "actual" readings count, and such actual readings will vary widely or slightly from one person to another: No two consciousnesses are alike and hence follow different signifying paths when they are making sense of the text.

It follows from this that traditional critical analysis of textual content loses any vestige of validity since the claim of such analyses,and their raison d'être, has invariably been that they can reproduce the text as received by "the audience". There is no such text: My best analysis of the "Boston Tea Party" sequence - however "correct" - would have been contradicted by the reading of 90 per cent of the Danish audience.

Finally, the excerpt can be used as an example of one of the pleasures of watching Dynasty. When they follow the serial these two people are engaging in a continuous fictional jigsaw puzzle, constantly on the look-out for new pieces, imagining what they will look like, tentatively fitting them into gaps in the narrative structure or character relations, and experiencing triumphant gratification when they succeed. I believe that among all the aesthetic magnets built into Dynasty the game of the fictional puzzle is one of the strongest, rewarding viewers for imaginative skill with a feeling of "competence","ingenuity" - "being good". Watching Dynasty thus becomes for the regular viewer the weekly reconstruction of self-confidence.

The Dynasty Project

The interview on which the introductory section is based was carried out in the context of The Dynasty Project, which is doing an empirical analysis of the cross-cultural reception of Dynasty.

Two series of interviews were carried out, one with 25 American

viewers in Los Angeles, the other with 16 Danish Dynasty regulars in the Copenhagen area[1]. The respondents were equally distributed with respect to sex and educational status (with/without college); the recruiting was done by two market research companies, the interviews took place in respondents' homes, in most cases with the repondent and myself as the only participants.

Each interview proceeded as follows:After the portable VCR had been connected, 5-15 minutes would usually be allowed for mutual familiarization, making coffee, etc., then we would watch Dynasty episode 101 together alternating bewteen ordinary small-talk and more pertinent issues, the latter usually on my initiative. After watching the episode the interview would continue until I felt that all relevant issues had been covered. This post-episode phase lasted between five minutes and over an hour.

The interview situation, evidently, was artificial, as are all such situations constructed by social researchers despite their frequent protestations to the contrary. However, the whole interview set-up was designed to overcome as far as possible the inherent awkwardness and to neutralize the strong normative controls on watching a low-brow commercial product (especially encountered in the Danish context)[2]: Hence no visible interview guide was used, I frequently stressed my own addiction to the program, and generally acted as a populist chameleon, reserving provocative questions for the last five minutes of the interview.

The transcribed interviews are subjected to qualitative analysis in two rounds: The present one of intuitive close-reading, to be followed by a more comprehensive and systematic analysis that depends on the development of a social semiotic of reading.

As so many other ongoing studies of cultural phenomena the Dynasty Project is interdisciplinary in the sense that theories,

methods, and results from many academic disciplines are brought to bear on the object under study. This is an absolute necessity when one has the ambition of grasping even a fraction of the kaleidoscopic range of issues raised in the study of texts vs. readers/society. Presumably the advantages outweigh the dangers of trying eclectically to be a jack-of-all-trades, although it is difficult to assess the actual compatibility of theoreticians as diverse as Fish, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Eco and Turner.

More specifically the Dynasty Project is interdisciplinary within media research in the sense that it tries to position itself at the point of intersection of two traditionally hostile research paradigms: The social science approach, stressing the quantitative analysis of empirical data, and the cultural studies approach concerned with the critical, often Marxist, qualitative analysis of "culture industry" ideology (see Gitlin 1978 and Schrøder 1986). The project, while anchored in the critical tradition, is impatient with its tendency to indulge in speculative analysis of media texts within the walls of academia; it therefore attempts to apply the sophisticated qualitative tools developed by this tradition to data collected through expeditions into the real world of the audience.

As the introductory quotation from Thorburn (1976) suggests the Dynasty Project has no sympathy with cultural-elitist attitudes to commercial television fiction and to popular culture in general (see Schrøder 1985).

The fact, usually looked upon with disdain, that commercial television has to aim for a common denominator of tastes and needs does not mean that television production must inevitably result in hopeless programs that cater only to the lowest instincts and the tritest emotions. It does mean that television must serve

as both reflector and moulder of mass culture, or that television "functions as a social ritual, overriding individual distinctions in which our culture engages, in order to communicate with its collective self" (Fiske and Hartley 1978:85).

Television entertainment thus serves as a symbolic representation of the hopes, dreams, and fears that inhabit the collective subconscious of a culture at a given point in time (cf. Gitlin 1983: 12), and can be read - or rather, the viewers' readings of television programs can be read as a cultural barometer that faithfully registers changes in the cultural climate and the popular mood: Current experiences of the national identity, the attitudes toward social tensions, the faith (or the lack of it) in traditional values and established institutions, the reactions to new phenomena that are emerging on the cultural horizon, etc.

Television today serves as the main forum for collective cultural processes, whether as originator or mediator of cultural reinforcement and innovation (cf. Newcomb and Hirsch 1984). In this respect there is a functional resemblance between television in modern culture and certain types of ritual in tribal society which function as "a cultural means of generating variability, as well as of ensuring the continuity of proved values and norms" (Turner 1977:69).

Writing about the so-called "rites of passage", i.e. rites which typically mark the transitions in the life cycle of an individual or the culturally relevant aspects of the seasons, Turner pays special attention to the middle stage of these rites, the so-called "liminal" (threshold) stage. The distinctive feature of liminality is its suspension of the ordinary:

> The essence of liminality is to be found in its release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of the 'uninteresting' constructions of common sense, the meaningful-

> mess of ordinary life' (...). Liminality is the domain of the 'interesting', or of 'uncommon sense'(ibid.:68).

Therefore, liminal processes may function as a kind of "metalanguage" through which a population evaluates its own routine behaviours: An institutionalization of the potential for regenerative renewal. Through liminal processes society juxtaposes its "indicative" mode of existence with "subjunctive" modes, "is" with "may be" or "should be", and hence provides for itself the potential for cultural change.[3]

Looking for the functional equivalents of liminality in complex societies Turner finds the aesthetic media, or the performative arts, because they compose "a reflexive metacommentary on society and history as they concern the natural and constructed needs of humankind under given conditions of time and place"(ibid.:73). In complex societies it is the performative arts which accomplish the transition from "indicative" to "subjunctive". Through the consumption of tv fiction, for instance, one enters a symbolic world whose signifying elements offer a communal release from the normal constraints of daily life: The realm of the imaginary.

Turner sees a great opportunity for analysts of modern culture in the exploration of both high art and popular genres, because they

> (...) make statements, in forms at least as bizarre as those of tribal liminality, about the quality of life in the societies they monitor under the guise of "entertainment" - a term which literally means "holding between", that is "liminalizing". (ibid.:73)

The Dynasty Project, then, looks upon Dynasty itself and the process of making sense of it as concrete manifestations of liminality and liminal behaviour. This perspective, in turn, has important consequences for the way the "hegemonic effect" of television is conceptualized (see Gitlin 1979).

While the concept of "hegemony" itself has introduced a less

deterministic view of omnipotent media ideology by pointing out the pluralistic "leaks" inherent in all successful hegemony, the concept nevertheless implies that the alleged ideological pluralism is ultimately an illusion. Whatever inner tensions and conflicts find expression in media content,"dominant ideology" remains unperturbed because the ideological leaks, the token admissions of social shortcomings, are always accomodated or co-opted by the dominant ideology.

However, faced with numerous instances in specific tv programs of genuinely oppositional perspectives, cultural critics are forced to withdraw to a rather diluted "core" definition of hegemony:

> What is hegemonic in consumer capitalist ideology is precisely the notion that happiness, or liberty, or fraternity can be affirmed through the existing private commodity forms, under the benign, protective eye of the national security state. This ideological core is what remains essentially unchanged and unchallenged in television entertainment at the same time the inner tensions persist and are even magnified.(Gitlin 1979:). (emphasis added).

Since this was written we have witnessed the arrival of new addictions like Hill Street Blues, Dallas, and Dynasty among others, in which even this "core" does not remain "unchanged and unchallenged". Are these programs not hegemonic then? Probably they are, but their version of hegemony is of a precariously defeatist kind:"Life is miserable, but there is nothing to be done about it."

Newcomb (1984) rightly criticizes the "unchanged core" view of hegemony, arguing that tensions in mass-mediated texts can be regarded as serious "challenges, in which the terms of the core are redefined or given varied application"(Newcomb 1984:37).[4]

Such real ideological challenges are possible because television texts are mediated by language, whose signifying processes are subject to constant change and multiple interpretations. Meanings cannot be fixed by dominant ideology or any other agency, al-

though there is a constant attempt by dominant ideology to achieve just that.

According to Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia a vast number of seperate "languages" according to race, class, region, gender, professional registers, group jargon, etc. are embedded into any given piece of social discourse:

> At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: It represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form. These "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying "languages".(Bakhtin 1981:291, quoted by Newcomb 1984:39).

The affinity between Bakhtin's and Fish's conceptualizations of the literary text (Fish 1980) is quite striking[5]: The visible/audible units of language are empty, or polysemous, signifiants invested with a vast range of signifiés each originating in a "language" of its own in the Bakhtian sense. The Boston Tea Party episode demonstrates how television can only supply the signifiants, viewers provide these with signifiés. It follows from this that whatever the intentions, no author or text can control the recipients' experience since in the "heteroglot" situation there will be as many signifiés, or discursive systems, as there are recipients[6].

In the vast majority of cases, presumably, the provision of meaning will follow processes of (sub)cultural intersubjectivity. But in many cases they don't, and even when they do no degree of analytical erudition can invest the critical scholar with the ability to designate the different meanings produced by viewers, let alone determine which is "dominant" and which is "aberrant"(cf. Fiske and Hartley 1978:81). The path to intersubjective as well as to subjective readings goes through empirical studies of actual

reception processes. There exists no shortcut from sedentary textual analysis to the textual experience of actual readers.

However, it is one thing to know where the road must be cleared through little known territory, quite another to set about doing it. As regards the implementation of relevant theories into specific analytical strategies for the reliable exploration of interview texts the Dynasty Project has so far done little beyond studying the available maps.

THE PLEASURE OF DYNASTY

Why do people get addicted to Dynasty, so that week after week they will faithfully seek the diverse gratifications its signifiers trigger? Obviously it has something to do with "needs": The interpretive process producing the meaning of Dynasty fascinates because somehow it meets the individualized sociopsychological needs of the viewer trying to make sense of the human condition in modern society.

So far the attempts within uses and gratifications studies to isolate the experienced needs that cause viewers to select specific media and programmes have produced few conclusive findings (McQuail 1983:164), probably for the simple reason that viewers have no awareness of need sources, only of specific impulses to watch one program rather than another.

Shifting the emphasis from need to taste there has been a tendency in recent years to think of audience patterns as not related in simple ways to demographic structures, but to more arbitrary taste preferences. Thus a "taste culture" is based on "an aggregate of similar content chosen by the same people"(ibid.:155), whereby program choices are detached from social background.

In many ways the tase culture concept is a useful one and its

influence is reflected in the fact that the Dynasty Project makes no a priori assumptions about class- or gender-specific readings. Working from the bottom up it carries out a "blind analysis" of each interview, inferring experiential patterns between viewers only after all interviews have been analyzed.

Despite this agnostic approach to the question of socially patterned experiences of tv content the Dynasty Project is sceptical of the view that taste culture "are a consequence in part of the genuine classlessness of some uses of leisure time"(ibid.: 156). People from diverse backgrounds may choose the same media product (as they do with Dynasty), but use it differentially. Thus, even if the culturally and socially stratified audience systems may have become neutralized on the level of exposure patterns they may still be operative on the level of decoding.

In other words, we cannot deduce from the socio-economic position of viewers which interpretive strategies they will adopt vis-a-vis a specific program, but "position in the social structure may be seen to have a structuring and limiting effect on the repertoire of discursive or 'decoding' strategies available to different sectors of an audience"(Newcomb 1984:36).

To sum up on "needs" and "taste", Dynasty regular viewers need and like the program because somehow its signifying structures stimulate the pleasurable attempt to make sense of the human condition in post-industrial capitalist society. For the individual viewer this attempt follows specific, though not predestined, social patterns, internalized in his or her socializing environment.

The rest of this article will discuss a number of potential dimensions of pleasure for Danish viewers, brought about by the viewing of Dynasty. For several of the respondents the weekly viewing

of Dynasty on Sundays at 5 p.m. is looked upon as a ritual of joy:[7]

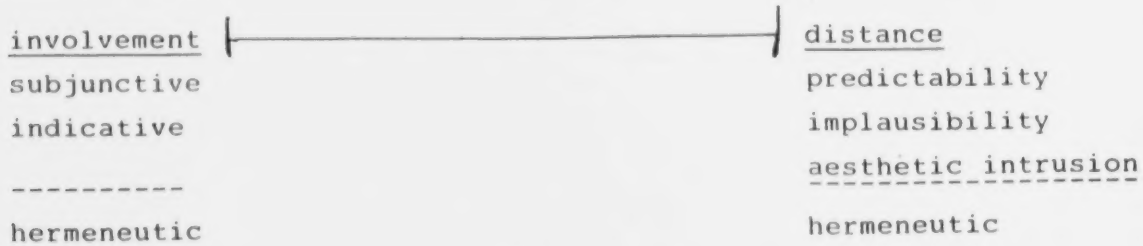
> On Sundays when I get out of bed I look forward to Dynasty so much I can hardly wait. It's as if, then one can clean the house before noon and things like that, and then be looking forward to the hour when it begins. (4:36)

The pleasure of Dynasty may stem from various sources: The sexual attractions of male and female characters, the display of incredible wealth, the nostalgia for family harmony, and innumerable others. While wishing to reject none of these, this study has found it useful to analyze the experiences of Dynasty in terms of two central concepts: Involvement and Distance, which may promote the attempt to understand the relation between viewer and the fictional content of Dynasty.[8]
Borrowing from Katz et al. (1983) a third concept to describe the way in which viewers commute between fiction and real life I shall try to demonstrate how the experience of no viewer can be confined to just one of the two categories, but rather how every viewer moves back and forth on the line between these two polar opposites.

On the one hand there are those viewers who sustain a general experience of involvement in the program, interspersed with moments of critical distance to some fictional features. On the other hand, there are those whose basically distanced experience is interspersed with moments of fictional involvement.

"Involvement" is not to be thought of as a uniform experience, but as a range of related experiences ("indicative","subjunctive"). In the same way "distance" will be subcategorized into several subtypes ("predictability","implausibility","aesthetic intrusion"). The "hermeneutic" mode of experience belongs to both categories.

The conceptual framework of the analysis can thus be represented in the following diagram in which opposing terms should not be regarded as pairs:



At the extreme end of involvement we would find viewers who are totally unable to distinguish between real life and the fictional universe - if such individuals exist among the adult population. Almost as involved are those who send flowers to soap opera weddings, or those who warn fictional husbands of their wives' infidelity. There were none of these among the respondents.

At the extreme end of distance we would find viewers who are so critical of the program that they may easily become non-viewers, but who go on watching solely in order to achieve continuous affirmation of their cultural superiority. All respondents were less critical than that.

In between are all those who commute between distance and involvement, who resemble each other in sometimes feeling alienated from and at other times immersing themselves in the program, but who differ from each other with respect to both the frequency of commuting and the distance travelled.

Involvement

Respondent AB (no.3) is a viewer who is fascinated by Dynasty:

> And then they have the same human problems like the rest of us, apart from money problems of course. But they are not at all happy, there is no reason to envy them anything except their money and their servants. - What I keep telling myself is how nice it would be to have somone to clean the house and keep things tidy (...) (3:14)

First, in spite of their immense wealth AB sees the Dynasty characters from the perspective of like-us-ness (Fiske and Hartley 1978: 107f): In basic ways the Carringtons are just like you and me. Making this sort of comparison between fiction and real life, based on a fairly rational evaluation, AB's comment on the program vs. life relation belongs to the indicative mode of discourse. Within this evaluative perspective she involves herself in the characters

as if they were real people and as if they had the same needs, intentions, feelings, etc. This indicative involvement may occur either in the explicit comparison of the previous example, or more implicitly when AB slips imperceptibly from fictional to real problems.

But towards the end of her utterance she adopts another mode of discourse: She imagines what it would be like to possess some of the Carrington attributes; thus identifying with fictional characters she enters the subjunctive mode, a moment of "liminality" (cf. above p. 7f) in which the conditions of everyday life have temporarily been suspended for the benefit of a daydream about what might be. This daydream is heavily invested with the needs originating in AB's burdensome daily life and reflects her desire for more time for herself.

For AB the experience of like-us-ness is so compelling that fact and fiction are merging in her consciousness: She is deeply concerned about Claudia's mental problems in the past and the stigma that keeps sticking to her:

> I understand her situation (...), why must one be stigmatized for the rest of one's life because of a mental problem in the past, and that's what happens in this country [Denmark]:"So you've been to Saint John's [mental hospital], I see!" (3:26)

In this way the meaning of Dynasty may become heavily dependent on the viewer's Danish experience; the characters are subjected to a Danish framework of understanding in which "Claudia" merges with any female patient in the Copenhagen mental hospital.

Five minutes earlier AB has brought an even more personal element into the interview, again prompted by Claudia's situation:

> I really understand her situation because there are so many mentally ill people in Denmark nowadays, and no-one can feel absolutely safe. My younger sister is a nurse, and we may all... tell me who hasn't taken sedative medicine. And that's why - take a look at life insurances (...). (3:18)

Thus she rambles on to mention alcoholism and other urgent pro-

blems. She may in effect be trying to tell me, however obliquely, that she understands Claudia because she herself has been in a similar situation.

The same kind of analogy between American fiction and Danish reality occurs numerous times, on issues like homosexuality, infidelity, divorce, age preferences for erotic/marital partners, etc. For instance AB predicts that Jeff and Nicki are heading towards divorce, continuing:

> This is really a mess, but do you know what, it's very easy for us to sit here and laugh at them,saying - but it happens very often in real life too, I mean it happens to ordinary people like us, - who doesn't know of a situation where this happened, right, when the woman had a lover, or the husband did, then you get the problem, it's not uncommon at all.(3:45)

There is an obvious element of para-social interaction in AB's experience of Dynasty; she is able to establish a vicarious relationship with fictional characters (McQuail 1983:159), because of the way she tends to dissolve the line between fiction and reality. Using Noble's distinction between two subtypes within para-social interaction, ~~some aspects of~~ AB's experience fall under the category of recognition: She interacts with the fictional characters as if they were real-life people, serving as an extended kin grouping (ibid.:160).

For some viewers this para-social dimension becomes almost tangible: SC (no.4) describes how the fictional world is invading reality when in some scenes "Jeff appears to be standing right here in this room"(4:25). - Not that she minds very much....

Now and again AB does signal a basic awareness of the aesthetic constructedness (distance) of the serial, but in most cases the tenuousness of this awareness is evident; talking about Amanda I ask her:

Int. Did you watch when the daughter appeared?
AB Yes.
Int. Why did she appear - I didn't see the episode when it

happened.

AB Why she appeared, well, because she had become old enough to begin to wonder who her father was and(...). (3:32)

It seems not to occur to her that my ambiguous question could also be interpreted as a request for information about the narrative constructedness of the serial (answer: Because the producers need a new character to speed up the action). AB is so enthralled in the Dynasty universe that she instinctively perceives the question as pertaining to the motivations intrinsic to characters.

The opposite happens with GO (no.7), a respondent whose reading is dominated by distance:

Int. Do you think Stephen will succeed in - how shall I put it - saving his marriage and making up his mind about his present sexual ambivalence?

GO No, I don't think so - no, because that's something they can keep using to keep the thing going, isn't it. (7:10)

Even though my question presupposes involvement in Stephen's torn identity, GO ignores this presupposition and her answer refers to the narrative utility of keeping him that way. It is thus evident that respondents' dominant perspective in reading the tv text has crucial consequences for the way they perceive research questions about that text.

Noble's (psychologically inaccurate) category of identification much resembles the type of involvement dealt with here as "subjunctive", which has more far-reaching ritual implications, though. "Identification" occurs when a viewer puts himself "so deeply into a tv character that one can feel the same emotions and experience the same events as the character is supposed to be feeling"(McQuail: 160).

In the present context, entering the realm of liminality and adopting a subjunctive mode of discourse occurs whenever a respondent projects himself/herself into a fictional character, pretending that "I am character X"; or identifies with a fictional character,

wishing that "I were more like character X". These processes are both clearly a playful, or "ludic" acceptance of commuting between fiction and reality: A sort of psychological[9] time-out in which viewers are relatively free to explore the boundaries of their personalities, to look upon "what they are" in the light of "what they might be".

Thus AB, finding Blake condescending when he and Krystle are having an argument about her desire for a career of her own, imagines how Krystle must be feeling and even proceeds to substitute for her in the dialogue:

> I think she herself feels that they have grown apart.(...) I think that gradually she may be warming up to something and say, "We have grown apart from each other, and money is not everything". And she already proved that when she sold her jewelry. (3:29)

There is not a doubt that here AB is playing with a female role she has sometimes wanted to adopt. At other moments in the interview subconscious slips-of-the-tongue have indicated that for years she has "subordinated" her own desire for education; while her husband has taken a business degree at evening college she "has not been allowed" to pursue similar goals, but has had to take care of the children and up to 3 or 4 menial jobs,"so that he could relax more". All of this information she volunteers without any overt bitterness, at one point she even states that "I don't feel that my needs are being suppressed in any way". AB may never get to actually adopt the self-assertive role towards her own husband. But fantasizing about revolt when watching Dynasty does not necessarily mean that she is merely letting off steam so as to endure patriarchal hegemony the better. The imaginary rebellion may equally well be a rehearsal for the real thing. Only time will tell.

Another remark of hers points in the same direction. AB does not

like Alexis, but nevertheless she admires some of her qualities:[10]

> Well, nobody really likes Alexis, but on the other hand I think she is a super-egoist, I mean she always puts herself first, not her children, even though she...this...but in a way I think...one likes her and one would like to be a little tough sometimes, so that one was a little more egoistic and not cared so much for everybody else.(3:16)

As this passage shows, subjunctive involvement should not be confused with sympathy for a character. Overall, Alexis is certainly not a favourite of AB's. But this does not prevent her from "trying on" certain aspects of the bitchy personality, just as she identifies with most ,if not all, of the other fictional characters.

Another respondent, SC, explicitly admits that she involves herself in the Dynasty fantasy world:

> When I sit down in front of the tv it's as if I...during that hour one could say that I immerse myself in that world, in those fine dinners and fine drinks and fine clothes.And when it's over, well then I'm just myself again.(4:23)

By implication, SC's experience of herself watching Dynasty is one of being transported to a state of "not-myself", i.e. a ludic putting on of another identity or other identities.

In this sense Dynasty offers a carnivalesque marketplace of imaginary personality masks, all yours for the taking.

Why do viewers involve themselves in these fictional processes, what are the rewards of commuting back and forth? AB evaluates Dynasty in the following manner:

> (...) it is not that thin, but it is somewhat candylike and... but...I relax with it, I am not speculating about other things - which I otherwise do...one always has some kind of problem.(3:35)

In other words, she escapes from the worries of everyday life, a concept which has remained undisputed as the whole truth about the pleasure of popular fiction until empirical studies were undertaken, showing the extremely partial nature of this truth (Katz and Liebes 1984; Liebes 1984; Radway 1983 and 1984).

There is no questioning the fact that AB really experiences this relief from worldly worries when she immerses herself in Dynasty. What needs to be explained is how this experience can co-exist with the evidence, provided by her reading of Dynasty as actualized in the interview, that she brings every thinkable everyday problem along in her baggage when she travels to Dynasty-land.

AB complains about the programs that show

AB :(...) all those discussions and worries and problems when you turn on the set (...), nothing but misery and there's nothing..."

Int. :Well, but in a way Dynasty is misery too, isn't it?

AB :Yes, it is, but after all that's fiction, isn't it?

Fictionalizing problems, it would seem, is in itself experienced as making them disappear <u>as problems</u>. The thought processes triggered by Dynasty are experienced as pleasurable because AB is not accountable to anyone for solutions (not even to herself); the viewing has no purpose beyond itself.

In addition to fictionalization as such, Dynasty is capable of making viewing even more pleasurable because of the way real-life problems are interwoven with blatantly improbable narrative elements, thereby repeatedly offering viewers the possibility of mentally catapulting themselves into a stance of relieving disbelief: This is too unrealistic to be taken seriously! (see below p. 22f).

Maybe the paradoxical merger of escapism and everyday problems is best expressed in the concept of "<u>self-reflexive escape</u>"(Fiske and Hartley 1978:80), reflecting the fact that upon entering any fictional universe we bring along enough of our real-life identities so as to effect a synthesizing exchange of thoughts and feelings between the two types of existence.

Furthermore, the occurrence of urgent problems in tv entertain-

ment makes it easier for viewers to realize that their very personal problems are indeed shared by their culture, bringing about the relieving experience of "I am not alone". A program like Dynasty makes us "relax", as AB puts it, because it bonds us "as viewers, via the message, to the reality of our culture, and thus lifting the burden of an isolating individualism from our shoulders"(ibid.).

Distance

Right from the first picture of the trailer GO (no.7) is hitting out right and left, pointing out reproachfully how wrong it is to associate Krystle ~~with jewelry~~ how terrible the whole trailer is, how she hates the signature tune so much that if she watches the trailer at all (she often doen't) she turns down the sound.

On the conscious level GO refuses throughout to let herself be involved in fictional events: She tersely points out the contrived, predictable coincidences, as when Stephen and Luke are caught in a (farewell) embrace by Claudia soon after Stephen has promised her never to see Luke again; she vigilantly registers implausible happenings, as when Jeff and Nicki stumble over a precious treasure in a public churchyard; she fires arrows of irony against dramatic clichés, commenting "how expert they are at falling down the stairs"(7:14); and she scoffs at passages of artificial dialogue, as when Daniel Reece helps Krystle to her feet after a fall from a horse:

> Then she fell off her horse, lying there on the grass, then - ugh! then I thought, Do people talk to each other like that? (...) It sounds as if they hardly know each other! (7:12)

The sequence when Nicki manages to get a dead-drunk Jeff to marry

her during their Bolivian treasure hunt simply makes her bridle:

> You noticed how he woke up to find he had been married to her - that's utterly unthinkable - that's absurd! (7:6)

In other words, GO watches Dynasty from a position of cultural superiority and deliberately exposes herself to a product that she only allows herself to experience through a filter of condescension, but which nevertheless appears to gratify her immensely. Watching Dynasty is a weekly test of her cultural discrimination, and she invariably passes with honours! The pleasure attained through the maintenance of fictional distance thus leads to the weekly reconstruction of self-confidence.

But in addition there are other benefits accrueing from the position of aloofness, because this stance may make it easier for viewers to legitimate their subconscious indulgence in the excessive immorality or the existential anguish of the serial.

GO is a woman with a traditional, fairly puritanical sense of morality, who reacts vociferously against the immorality of Dynasty; when Alexis and Dex are having an argument upon her return from Blake Carrington's father's deathbed in Sumatra, Alexis justifies her presence there by referring to her marriage to Blake, causing GO to blurt out intrusively:

> But that's non of your [Alexis] business! You've been divorced from him for ages. - And <u>you</u> [Dex] have been pretty busy, you've been sleeping with Amanda [Alexis's daughter].

Addressing the fictional characters, reproaching them for their lack of propriety and their tainted morals, GO is overtly treating them as "real" human beings; this, however, makes no sense communicatively. Evidently the real adressee is her fellow-viewer, and the real objective is not to affect fictional behaviour, but to signal her disapproval of this behaviour; as she puts it later on:

> It's so messy, I really don't understand how American viewers can tolerate such immorality (7:8).

What makes it easier for her to tolerate the excessive display of divorce, general promiscuity and incest is precisely the stance of critical disbelief, which determines her conscious perception of Dynasty. Her ambivalence between spontaneous curiosity and fictional involvement on the one hand (referring to Jeff as 3d, 2d, and 1st person in less than a minute), and critical distance and moral indignation on the other is illustrated in the following piece of dialogue, again on Jeff and Nicki's marriage:

> GO : He can't have got very much out of that. - That sobered him up! - And how did she get that [ring] - she must have brought it from the States. - No! You [Jeff] are not just going to swallow that one, are you? - Can I [Jeff] see the marriage certificate, please!
> Int. : But why do you think he accepts it, because he does!
> GO : Well, it might be some sort of, no I suppose it cannot be some sort of code of honour, because he's been in bed with her, and then he thinks he should marry her. (...)
> Int. : Is it because he's such a nice guy?
> GO : Well, he's not that nice, after all he's had affairs left and right. (7:18)

Not surprisingly, she ends up rejecting the scene as "unrealistic" - unless that's the way they do these things in America"(7:18f).

Thorburn (1976) in his discussion of tv melodrama in general defines the genre as

> a sentimental and artificially plotted drama that sacrifices characterization to extravagant incident, makes sensational appeals to the emotions of its audience, and ends on a happy or at least a morally reassuring note.(Thorburn 1976:530)

For Thorburn the happy endings and extreme implausibilities of tv melodrama cannot simply be dismissed as clichés appealing only to the vulgar taste; he sees these features as the conventions, or established "rules" of the genre, indeed as "the enabling conditions for an encounter with forbidden or deeply disturbing materials: not an escape into blindness or easy reassurance, but an instrument for seeing"(ibid.:532).

In other words, tv melodrama establishes an aesthetic contract with its viewers: It offers them an opportunity to explore individual and social tensions and to face behaviour shocking or threatening to prevailing moral codes, with the promise that the expe-rience will end on a note of reassurance and moral acceptability, and be stranded with so frequent implausibilities that they can suspend involvement and withdraw to a position of superior distance, should they begin to feel uncomfortably affected by the fictional display of agony and immorality

Thorburn explicitly excludes soap opera from his analysis, on account of its serial unending nature. However, one may still utilize his hypothesis if one adjusts the analysis accordingly. Having excluded itself from the possibility of final reassurance, Dynasty (and soap opera in general) has to intensify its supply of alternative unrealistic elements, as recurring safety valves for the viewers, who know that their longing for a happy end will not be satisfied.

Equally knowledgable about the aesthetic conventions of Dynasty, they expect the constant occurrence of improbable happenings: The blatant constructedness of the plots, the marvellous coincidences and operatic characterization. As a result, viewers are usually not in the least upset by these feature - they do indeed consider them as conventionalized "rules of the game"; with Danish viewers this game is perceived as distinctively American:

AB Fallon will turn up again, but with a different face or...just like...well she may not want to be in the serial any more (...) and then suffered a loss of memory, something like that.

Int. Now if that sort of thing happened in Matador [popular Danish historical series, 24 episodes] - would you find that reasonable?

AB No that would be more artificial, I guess.

Int. Why does one accept it when it happens in Dynasty (..)?

AB (...) well, when it's American one accepts all sorts of things (...) we like to sit and swallow it.

(3:34)

Int. (...) that's quite a coincidence, isn't it?
JH Yeah, but serials are like that.
(15:23)

Even GO, who takes pride in fastening on occurrences of the unrealistic sometimes adopts a more relaxed attitude to these generic conventions:

Int. Why do you think we go along with such frequent substitution of actors (...)?

GO Well, he [Stephen] didn't want to continue, or he made excessive demands so they had to make a substitution with someone else, well, that's just the way it is.
(7:24)

The pleasure of Dynasty thus appears to be generated by a fundamental, convention-determined dynamo of alternating involvement in and distance from disturbing moral dilemmas of contemporary society.

In some cases one may even suspect that viewers are not simply commuting between the polar opposites, but that they have one foot in each camp, as it were. The experiences of involvement and distance may be simultaneous and interdependent, yet still separate. This complex experience seems to be at the bottom of SC's report of her feelings when Jeff was ill:

> What I didn't like was when Jeff was ill. At that time, I was really looking forward to the episode when he wouldn't be ill any more. (4:18)

Empathetically she suffers with Jeff, but simultaneously and because of her empathy she is looking forward to the episode - which as a connoisseur of Dynasty genre rules she knows must come - when he is well again. Positioned inside the narrative and outside of it she is also in a perfect position to offer predictions and solutions to narrative puzzles:

> Even though one may see the appearance of new characters as stupid, well, it's also exciting! So every time I am looking

> forward to seeing what happens to them. For instance when this woman Dominique suddenly appeared - what sort of a person would she turn out to be...(4:24).

In this field of tension between the consciousness of dramatic excess and the desire for imaginative immersion lies the potential pleasure of approaching Dynasty as a hermeneutic challenge.

Dynasty - interminable hermeneutic puzzle

A couple of years ago the syndicated American soap opera Rituals presented a new ratings ploy: It invited its viewers to join a competition based on the serial's narrative development, offering $ 100,000 to the viewer who could figure out the victim, perpetrator, and motive of a murder to be committed on the show four weeks later.

As the Boston Tea Party interview excerpt quoted at the beginning of this paper shows, Dynasty viewers are spontaneously engaging in analogous conjectural pursuits even without the prospect of such a generous prize:

> HH But that photographer, I'd be fucking pleased to know who he - or she - is, that's for sure.
> JH I believe it's a woman, it was such a slender glove.
> HH I can't figure that one out.
> Etc. (cf. p. 1f)

Almost all respondents treat Dynasty as an ongoing narrative puzzle. Drawing on the memory bank accumulated during months or years of watching the serial, viewers may derive pleasure and self-confidence from unwinding convoluted plots and calculating the origin or predicting the outcome of puzzling narrative elements, such as the parentage of Alexis's long-lost daughter Amanda.[11]

The phenomena dealt with here under the category of narrative puzzle encompasses several subtypes, one of which is prophesies about the immediate fictional future:

> JH When she [Dominique] got on stage in order to sing I said, She'll collapse, you just wait and see! (15:2)

He probably felt quite pleased when she actually did! On another occasion JH suffered a humiliating defeat when he opposed his wife's hypothesis about Dex having malaria:

> HH Last Sunday, with Dex, when he was shivering like that, what did I tell you [husband], he had better get back home, he's got malaria, then Jorgen says "How the fuck do you know that?", well that's evident, fool, are you stupid or what! Of course he had malaria. (15:32)

Another subtype dels with the unknown identities such as who is the spy photographer and who sent him/her:

> Who sent that photographer, that's the question' It's not at all clear whether it is Alexis or Blake. (7:5)

> Oh, talking about Dynasty, have you [interviewer] worked out who it is taking those pictures. It's exasperating not to know (...). It might be something Blake had arranged. Or Alexis in order to revenge herself on Blake or something like that, I considered this possibility too - it could also be Dex, she could have got him to do it. (4:4f)[12]

A third subtype covers hypotheses about what the narrative justification of aesthetic puzzles will be. The more familiar they are with generic conventions, the better will they be able to predict for instance how Fallon will be brought back into the serial (No-one doubts that she will come back). Only viewers with adept imaginations will possess the creative skill required to straddle the gap between critical distance and inventive immersion: In order to succeed they have to construct a plausible addition to the aesthetic construct within the boundaries of the fictional conventions; imaginative immersion is necessary in order to find plausible missing pieces to the narrative puzzles (Fallon's death, loss of memory, plastic surgery), without abandoning the consciousness of constructedness ("Fallon" has grown tired of her role).

However widespread the use of television as "electronic wallpaper", the term certainly does not adequately describe the average Dynasty viewer's approach to the program. Particularly in the case

of keen puzzle-makers the interviews document that viewers follow the program very regularly (some have only missed 3 or 4 out of more than a hundred episodes) and pay meticulous attention to all visual and verbal details. For instance JH notices the "slender hand" of the spy photographer, leading him to hypothesize that it must be a woman, just as he and his wife register Ashley Mitchell's verbal reference to the Boston Tea Party and immediately start to build hypotheses around it. And SC, surmising that Daniel Reece may be behind the spy photographer, vigilantly observes the behaviour of one of Reece's stable hands:

> One of them appears very ... he seems to act kind of funny every time he sees Krystle. (4:5)

On the background of the present empirical study it is not difficult to agree with Thorburn's attempt to rehabilitate the audience of popular tv melodrama from the negative evaluations of the cultural elite. He sees this audience as

> impressive in its genuine sophistication, its deep familiarity with the history and conventions of the genre. For so literate an audience, the smallest departure from conventional expectations can become meaningful, and this creates endless chances for surprise and nuanced variation, even for thematic subtlety. (Thorburn 1976:539)

The conceptualization of Dynasty as a fictional jigsaw puzzle, requiring viewers to engage in a hermeneutic process in order to make sense of the temporary gaps in the text is analogous to (and probably somehow inspired by) Williamson's (1978) analysis of the strategies used by advertisements to involve readers in their signifying processes. Advertisers realize that man is a hermeneutic animal and exploit this knowledge in designing ads which invite our participation by requiring us "to <u>do</u> something, to become involved; it is like a children's game or puzzle"(Williamson 1978:76).

When we accept the ad's invitation to work out a solution and succeed we get the impression that we have accomplished something

and feel "incontrol" of the text: We break up what at a first glance appears as an absurdity, we work out the meaning of the pun, we make the sense! Really this is an illusion, says Williamson, for although puzzles and jokes require us to fill something in, to decipher the meaning,

> these hermeneutic processes are clearly not free but restricted to the carefully defined channels provided by the ad for its own decipherment. A puzzle has only one solution, A missing piece in a jigsaw has only one shape, defined by its contingent pieces. (ibid.:72)

However true this may be it does not prevent the individual, child or adult, from experiencing immense gratification from finally fitting in that difficult "piece" in a crossword puzzle, jigsaw puzzle, advertisement, or soap opera narrative. And it seems doubtful whether anybody would actually suffer form the delusion of hermeneutic freedom in such cases, i.e. be ignorant of the fact that the puzzle was constructed with a specific solution in mind. Therefore the effect of such feelings of hermeneutic competence must be judged to be wholly beneficial, increasing the self-confidence of the sense-maker.

There is another aspect, however, which may be more dubious in its ideological effect:

> (...) many complex psychic processes are involved in the work of the ad, and the significance of absences and puzzles in ads is that they give us the opportunity for a "conscious" activity that masks these unconscious processes. They present their "manifest" meaning to us latent, thereby concealing the real "latent" meaning". (ibid.:73)

In the context of Dynasty viewing it is very possible that concentration on the unravelling of plot obscurities takes away attention from less prominent ideological strands. This may explain why Dynasty's overall feeling of existential meaninglessness never surfaces as compelling experience in the interviews: In a few instances respondents comment on the despair and anguish endemic to

some of the serial characters; but the general meaninglessness of the human condition in the modern world is never raised to the level of manifest articulation. Evidently, this absence of existential comments may stem from the fact that no-one "reads" such issues from the serial text. Alternatively the reason may be that viewers immerse themselves in hermeneutic puzzles so as to divert their conscious attention away from more disturbing insights into the human predicament. This of course does not preclude the possibility that existential readings are seething in the subconscious of Dynasty viewers. It just means that, through the fictional puzzles, Dynasty kindly offers its loyal audience a built-in safety valve against the compelling possibility that life is meaningless, assisting their instinct, against whatever odds, to make sense.

NOTES

1. Danish television programmers in 1982 presented the serial under the name "Dollars" in spite of the fact that "dynasty" has a natural equivalent in the Scandinavian vocabulary, which was used by Norwegian Broadcasting calling the serial "Dynastiet".
   The public explanation of the renaming referred to money being a dominant theme in the serial, while the unmistakable intention was to signal through assonance to the tens of thousands who had protested against the recent cancellation of Dallas that they would be given a substitute opiate of similar low quality.

2. The "normative controls" which regulate media behaviour are discussed by McQuail (1983:160ff). He notes how many people "show a certain amount of guilt over high levels of television use and some kinds of content preference"(ibid.).

3. I am grateful to Daniel Dayan for introducing me to Turner's work. See Dayan and Katz 1985.

4. Along similar lines Willis and Corrigan (1980 and 1983) propose a view of popular television which rejects the manipulation/pathology/compensation perspective for the benefit of an alternative view which sees popular entertainment as a healthy response to the working-class condition in modern society. To Willis and Corrigan ~~popular forms of~~ tv are in themselves a "move towards a working class cultural problematic", towards "'non-bourgeois' 'knowledge' and resistance"(Willis and Corrigan 1980:310f).

   In the empirical analysis of popular entertainment and its reception this "counter-hegemonic" view entails "a willingness to be taken by surprise by the complexity and the 'resistance' of so-called subordinate cultural practices"(Skovmand 1985:53).

5. Turner, saying that "texts not only animate and are animated by contexts but are processually inseverable from them"(Turner 1977: 61) also shares this conceptualization. For Turner,"processual symbolic analysis" is concerned with "the interpretation of the meaning of symbols considered as dynamic systems of signifiers, signifieds, and changing modes of signification in temporal sociocultural processes"(ibid.:77).

   It would seem that Bourdieu's concept of "habitus", i.e. the systems of dispositions structuring individual practice in accordance with class belongingness (though not in a strict sense), is in some ways similar to Bakhtin's concept of "languages" of heteroglossia:
   "[Habitus] ensures the active presence of past experiences which, as part of each organism in the form of schemes of perception, of though and of action, more surely than all formal rules and explicit norms, tend to guarantee the conformity of practices and their regularity across time".(Translated and quoted by Skovmand 1985, who made me aware of Bourdieu's work.

6. The Boston Tea Party example corresponds closely to Fish's anecdote about the "17th century poem", in which students were told that a list of six authors' names was such a poem and were asked to interpret it - which they did very successfully (Fish 1980:322-337). The point is that the meaning of the structured words derives entirely from the context, in Fish's case the context of "poetry class", in the Dynasty interview the context of Dynasty viewing. Each context carries a number of established conventions and practices which lead to a specific and valid (however "wrong") interpretation of the text.

7. In this paper quotations from 4 of the 16 interviews are used:

   no. 3 : AB, woman, 40 years, office worker, married, 2 children, no college.
   no. 4 : SC, woman, 20 years, cook's assistant, married, no college.
   no. 7 : GO, woman, 65 years, retired hospital catering officer, married, some college.
   no. 15: JH, man, 55 years, traffic warden, married, one child.

   Spouses were present during nos. 4 and 15.
   Nos. 3,4, and 7 were based on Dynasty episode 101, no. 15 was based on episode 105.

8. The original source of this way of conceptualizing the pleasure of prime time soap opera is Niels Aage Nielsen, Seriesening i tv, Danish Broadcasting Research Report, 1982 ("Serials on tv").

   On the basis of a close-reading of Dynasty as text Gripsrud (1985) suggests that the sustained ambivalence of Dynasty on many aesthetic levels (character identities and relations, camera use, and narrativity) enables viewers to move relatively freely between involvement in and distance from the fictional universe.

9. Sometimes these psychological processes may spill over into a distinctive physical impact as when SC watched the door to gay friend Luke's apartment closing behind Stephen:"(...) then I got this weird ~~feeling in my stomach~~, I really didn't like it" (4:38).

   SC's sympathy for Claudia and Stephen's marriage, and her instinctive repugnance to homosexuality, produce a reaction one would normally only expect from someone directly involved: she almost feels sick.

10. During the interview AB is watching Dynasty episode 101 for the second time, since she also watched it when it was broadcast two weeks before. Thus she has seen the scene later in the episode in which Krystle tells Blake:

    "(...) till now I've been content to live my life through everybody else's eyes. My life has been on hold for so many years, listening to their problems, trying to help solve them. I've been a passive person, while everybody else does! But now I want my chance to do! And I don't want my life to slip away without having had that chance!"

11. The gratification from finding the pieces temporarily withheld from the narrative should not be confused with the pleasurable anguish of observing characters fall into tragic traps, because they do not know what we know. In such cases we are simply better informed than they, because the narrative has supplied us with the pieces necessary to appreciate their agonizing, unnecessary misunderstandings. In real puzzles we supply the pieces relying on our serial memory and capacity for creative deduction.

12. Colleagues have pointed out to me that the interview evidence of hermeneutic activities may be a research construct, i.e. respondents who want to prove their knowledge about Dynasty to the interviewer, who represents an outside authority on Dynasty, may find that they can best demonstrate their insight by displaying their command of the convoluted character/plot relations.

    While this cannot be totally denied, SC's spontaneous question to me appears to reduce the likelihood of such a bias. The way

she formulates her question indicates that she is merely seeking the informed guess of a fellow addict, not the correct answer from an expert who knows.

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